Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: Understanding Religious Identity in Educational Contexts
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25688

Research on the Role of Power and Privilege in Shaping Human Mobility

Sihan Liu

University of California, Irvine, Irvine, USA
sihal21@uci.edu

Abstract. This research examines the intricate dynamics between mobility and structural power within modern societies. Although the common explanation focuses on individual ambition as the key force behind upward mobility, mobility is sometimes also influenced by privileges and institutional frameworks. Through an interdisciplinary analysis that encompasses sociology, economics, and urban studies, the investigation examines the impact of various factors—such as class, gender, education, and geographic location—on individuals' capacities to advance socially, economically, or physically. Through specific case studies—including youth migration in China and Nigeria, waithood (the state of waiting for opportunities) in Africa, and urban exclusion due to gentrification and border policies—the investigation underscores how power determines population mobility. The research emphasizes that mobility driven by meritocracy is deeply flawed, advocating for policies that not only acknowledge but also systematically confront inequality.

Keywords: Mobility, inequality, power, privilege, youth migration

1. Introduction

Mobility commonly embodies a culture of advancement—whether it's the transition to a more fulfilling professional position, the act of relocating to a different national context, or the aspiration to elevate one's social standing. Societal messaging often supports the notion that effort determines success, which perpetuates the idea that anyone can achieve a better life through hard work. Recent exploration, however, reveals a critical blind spot within this presumption—the systemic barriers that hinder a significant portion of the populace from moving ahead [1]. This paper addresses the proposition that mobility is multifaceted, encompassing not just actions but also power dynamics—its distribution, wielders, and the beneficiaries of such mobility.

Utilizing the theoretical groundwork proposed by the New Mobilities Paradigm, this study scrutinizes the intersection of accessibility and mobility through lenses of privilege, class, gender, and national demarcations. In particular, the impact on youth and marginalized communities is emphasized. Global illustrations—from the Chinese "Run" movement and the diminished aspirations of African youth in "waithood," to the differentiated dynamics of gendered mobility in public spaces—will be deployed to delineate the concealed machinations of power within the mobility discourse.

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25688

By analyzing academic research results and anthropological data from the real world, this article will explore some fundamental issues: the autonomy of people's actions and its impact on the equality situation in contemporary society. These inquiries are of great significance as they confront the illusion of universal accessibility of mobility.

2. How power affects mobility

Mobility is a multidimensional concept that includes social, economic, and geographic dimensions. Social mobility refers to an individual's ability to shift within the social hierarchy, often influenced by access to education, occupation, and cultural capital [1]. Economic mobility, closely linked to income and wealth, measures whether individuals can improve their financial situation over time [2]. Geographic or physical mobility involves the movement of people across locations, whether between rural and urban areas or across national borders [3]. Although these forms of mobility are frequently studied separately, they are deeply interconnected. For example, limited access to quality education can hinder both social and economic advancement, which in turn may restrict one's ability to migrate for better opportunities [4]. As noted by Pew researchers, strong social capital is often a prerequisite for upward economic mobility, revealing how these domains are mutually reinforcing rather than isolated [5].

There is no aspect of mobility unaffected by power—whether wealth, social status, or socio-legal privilege. Structural advantages and disadvantages fundamentally shape physical, economic, and social mobility. Thus, failing to consider the structural dynamics of power (institutional character included) is an incomplete analysis of mobility.

2.1. Wealth and privilege

Wealth affords individuals access to quality schools, safe neighborhoods, and quality healthcare; the advantages that accrue from the access to wealth persist through generations, rendering such favorable circumstances nearly impossible to extricate. Those in positions of wealth and privilege possess advantageous access upon entering adulthood because of the accumulated privilege granted by the availability of the requisite resources. Such sub-privilege/access includes—but is not limited to—after-school tutoring, access to unpaid internships, and other forms of invaluable social and professional networking opportunities.

On the contrary, individuals from low-income communities attend underfunded schools, live in unsafe neighborhoods, and face pressure to work at an early age to support their families. As Wilson notes, disproportionate poverty concentration in urban locales contributes to highly impoverished communities; these conditions, in turn, further exacerbate inequality due to limited access, reason enough to undermine social mobility [6].

2.2. Education and job access

When low-income students manage to enroll in higher education, they become subject to a plethora of toxic stresses that characterize many individuals' college experiences. These include student debt, the pressure to financially support their families, and a lack of adequate professional social networks. Logan found that the segregated school systems in which many of these individuals learn serve as a further deterrent to their social mobility; that is, they are less college-prepared and less likely to graduate despite their best efforts [4]. Having entered the job market, individuals lose ground to the effects of discrimination and privilege, which further inhibit mobility potential.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25688

2.3. Borders and citizenship

Borders function as powerful instruments of global inequality, determining who can move freely and who cannot. For instance, graduates from elite institutions like the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology in Russia often benefit from relatively unrestricted international mobility, thanks to their affiliations and access to privileged networks—opportunities not available to the majority. This disparity underscores how national citizenship status and institutional connections influence one's mobility potential. As Fargues notes in his study on Palestine, borders are not neutral—they are mechanisms that reproduce political power, granting mobility to some while denying it to others based solely on their passport [7].

3. Case studies: youth and inequality

3.1. Youth migration: "Run" and "Japa"

One such locus is the "Run" and "Japa" (derived from 'Japan,' though often referring to migration to English-speaking countries) movement that characterizes millions of people today, particularly youth aged 18-30. The 'Run' phenomenon highlights youth desperation to escape domestic crises—unemployment, repression, violence, and authoritarian policies [8]. This has propelled them towards migrating abroad to seek better academic, professional, and economic opportunities. In China, many are fleeing a sky-high cost of living to escape systemic nefariousness, crippling levels of debt, and lack of freedom to pursue the academia and career of their dreams [8].

In Nigeria, the "Japa" movement has emerged as a widespread youth-driven response to the country's worsening conditions. Faced with an economic downturn, pervasive insecurity, high unemployment, and institutional corruption, many young Nigerians view emigration as their only viable option. Rather than remaining trapped in a stagnant system, they are choosing to leave in pursuit of better opportunities abroad—reframing migration as an act of personal agency and resistance [9].

Consequently, migration in nearly all cases serves as an act of agency for many youth who, having been deprived of human rights by their own governments, choose to exercise the only remnant decision left to them: mobility.

3.2. Waithood and the delay of adulthood

The nearly similar term "Waithood" was recently coined by Alcinda Honwana to describe the state in which many youth currently are; this refers to the delay in many young individuals' transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa [10]. Youth are often a populous majority in many of these countries, and in many cases, youth residing in urban centers face challenges even greater than those of their rural peers—they are further exploited, face discrimination, and have little-to-no work opportunities. Honwana argues that systemic neglect drives governments to weaponize 'victimhood' narratives, distracting the international community with myths—such as blaming youth for their own marginalization—while avoiding structural reforms. Nations will begin supporting hierarchical agency behaviors and paths by instituting policies that encourage entrepreneurship as the solution for youth development without addressing the systemic issues that promote youth marginalization.

Mobility and adulthood for many remain unheard-of dreams; having become lodged in waiting rooms, many do not envision a time when they will exit into the world of adulthood due to external

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25688

structural conditions that curtail individual rights and agency.

3.3. Gender and mobility

Gender intersects and interacts with race, income, and citizenship factors to produce diverse forms of violence that inhibit mobility as the experience of women across the world reflects. In most communities, an overlap of power hierarchy and social expectations inhibits women from penetrating the boundaries designed to keep them immobile: the male sphere. Protests using colorful symbolism are often met with military repression, reinforcing gendered immobility—women are systematically confined to spaces that deny their autonomy.

In addition, the negative press and complete political funding support for sectors that contribute to their mobility via the private sector will likely enhance their invisibility and allow the state to maintain its boundaries.

3.4. Gentrification and displacement

Gentrification in America has classified and rearranged such urban opportunity with the transformation of poor, working-class neighborhoods into rich middle-class enclaves as wealthier individuals take over to initiate policies to address that lack of access to quality education and schools that were partly their fault. By inflating property prices and rents, gentrification displaces low-income residents from neighborhoods with essential resources—hospitals, clinics, and community centers—replacing them with middle-class developments and commercial spaces.

This process has always been cloaked as so-called revitalization: poor, working-class neighborhoods receive initial redevelopment funds, and then the entire affluent that moves in just takes advantage of own or outside private business funds to acquire and expand services; especially early-career businesses, buyout photo collage—there was far more of that approach earlier on. Many focus their scopes on only positive health where highly educated, business background types, and Amazonie-born market engineers with scarce education should all now disappear into. All of the red zones that negative money should end arose in 2019, still quite-yellow think smuggler. Deals didn’t matter, including oversupply

4. Conclusion

Mobility is one of the most significant elements today towards freedom, opportunity, and social progress. This paper has shown that the concept of mobility—whether through economic achievement, physical relocation, or social advancement—is not solely defined by individual effort, capital, or input. Instead, mobility is shaped and restricted by entrenched institutional structures, historical injustices, and imbalances in power and resource allocation. From the phenomenon of "waithood" in Africa to the structural displacement caused by urban gentrification, it is clear that access to mobility is governed by power dynamics.

Though in principle, meritocracy performs its functions well, it fails in practice under conditions of disparity. Mobility for the wealthy, urban, and educated individuals is easier and, hence, less protectable than for women, migrants, and the working class. For the latter, mobility not only takes hard work, effort, finances, and much more, it takes overcoming barriers that were never placed in front of the former.

Shifting the idea of mobility from individual achievement to social responsibility is an essential step toward creating a more just society—one where individual success does not inherently

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25688

disadvantage others, and where mobility is recognized as a construct of power, and thus imperfect. In this light, there is no meritocratic promise with respect to mobilization, and only then shall we be capable of virtually removing the walls that separate us, whether spatially, socially class-wise, or corporeally.

References

[1] Friedman, Sam, and Daniel Laurison. The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged. Harvard University Press, 2020.
[2] Chetty, Raj, et al. “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940.” Science, vol. 356, no. 6336, 2017, pp. 398–406.
[3] International Organization for Migration (IOM). World Migration Report 2022. Geneva, 2022.
[4] Logan, John R. “Residential Segregation and Its Role in Social Stratification.” AEA Papers and Proceedings, vol. 114, 2024, pp. 78–84.
[5] Pew Charitable Trusts. “Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations.” Pew Economic Mobility Project, 2012.
[6] Wilson, William Julius. The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy. University of Chicago Press, 2014.
[7] Fargues, Philippe. “Mobility and Border Politics in the Middle East: The Case of Palestine.” International Migration Review, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017.
[8] Wang, Jing. “Why China’s Young People Are 'Running’ Abroad.” The Diplomat, 2023.
[9] Akanle, O., and O. Adésìnà. “The Japa Syndrome and the Migration of Nigerians to the United Kingdom: An Empirical Analysis.” Comparative Migration Studies, vol. 11, 2023, article no. 35.
[10] Honwana, Alcinda. Youth and Revolution in Tunisia. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.